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# Walt Whitman: The Man Behind the Words

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Walt Whitman: The Man Behind the Words

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillments of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
University of Nebraska Lincoln

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2018

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## ABSTRACT

Walt Whitman is often considered to be one of the greatest American poets. His ways of writing were unconventional, inappropriate to a degree (according to Victorian standards), yet they intrigued readers not only of the New World, but also those of the Old World. But his writing was not the only thing he was known for. The “Good Gray Poet” was also known for being gentle and warm-hearted, with a striking face and piercing blue eyes. He was welcoming to his neighbors, visitors, and passers-by on the street.

This thesis seeks to understand the man behind *Leaves of Grass*. Through careful analysis of Whitman’s collected interviews, housed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s *Walt Whitman Archive*, I analyze if the conclusions reached in the interviews are an accurate representation of who Walt Whitman was. I pay special attention to the interviews Whitman allegedly conducted with himself, and any biases that exist as a result. I have also elected to limit the scope of my interviews to dates prior to Whitman’s death, thus from October 15, 1866, to February 13, 1892.

This thesis is divided into five sections, each an attempt to further contextualize and explain Whitman’s interviews. The first addresses the historic background of the interview genre of the nineteenth century; second, Whitman’s character and alleged interview performance; third, Whitman’s collaboration with others; fourth, Whitman and his interviews with himself; and finally, a conclusion, where I will revisit the question of the accuracy of these interviews regarding Whitman’s character.

**Key Words:** Walt Whitman, Interview, Language, Collaboration, Egotism, Image, Self

## Part 1: The Interview as a Genre

An interview, as defined in the 1898 *Webster International Dictionary for the English Language*, is “a conversation, or questioning, for the purpose of eliciting information for publication; the published statement so elicited.”<sup>1</sup> The term itself has existed in the vernacular as a noun since the sixteenth century, however its specialized meaning was developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> *Webster’s* dictionary also cites “interview” as a verb, meaning “to have an interview with; to question or converse with, especially for the purpose of obtaining information for publication.” Considering the two definitions, the focus of the interview is placed on the information derived from the interview rather than the meeting itself.

The modern twenty-first century connotation of an interview, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a conversation between a journalist or radio or television presenter and a person of public interest, used as the basis of a broadcast or publication.”<sup>3</sup> The very act of an interview has evolved with the progression of technology, represented through screen, podcast, magazine or newspaper article, and brief quotes listed in the back of popular novels. It is now rarely considered its own methodological category but is instead often lumped into categories such as life stories, surveys, or case studies.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews have only been an established genre since the very end of the nineteenth century. As a result, no nineteenth century studies were conducted on the subject. All analyses of interviews have been conducted since 1900. Considering the modern connotation of the interview, however, they have been incorporated into several aspects of social life, including

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<sup>1</sup> “Interview,” in *Webster’s International Dictionary for the English Language*, ed. Noah Porter (Springfield: Merriam, 1898), 781.

<sup>2</sup> Paata Natsvlashvili, “For the Genesis of Interview as a Genre,” in *European Scientific Journal* 2 (Special Edition, December 2013), 384.

<sup>3</sup> See also: “a meeting of people face to face, especially for consultation.”

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Platt, “The History of the Interview,” in *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, ed. F. Gubrium and J.A. Holsstein (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2002), 9.

medicine, journalism, and business.<sup>5</sup> The modern perception of the interview aligns closest to a conversation with a journalist. Considering the contemporary understanding, interviews, in their broadest sense, are when one person asks a question on a particular topic or issue, and another person responds.<sup>6</sup> Interviewers and their subjects engage in conversation to identify the subject's opinions on a particular topic. Regarding authors, interviewers seek to allow insight into a writer's mind and works.<sup>7</sup> The recording and publicizing of the questions and answers serve to disseminate knowledge.<sup>8</sup> This knowledge is of interest to those who want to know more about the subject and to better understand how works come to fruition.

The information derived from an interview is categorized in one of two ways—quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative information is measured, looking for specific results and comparing it to other existing results.<sup>9</sup> Qualitative information, on the other hand, explores people's understanding of their lives and aspects of their experiences.<sup>10</sup> Qualitative interviews take the journalism aspect to the utmost degree because they are often represented in narrative form. The thematic questions of the qualitative interview create a narrative outline for the subject, and ultimately seek to link the narrative to the “wider social, political, and environmental context.”<sup>11</sup> The point of the interview is to understand how the subject views their life, as well as how they view themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

As the knowledge derived from interviews is supposed to be of interest to the public, subjects of interviews are often figures of prominence. These include not just business and

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<sup>5</sup> Natsvlshvili, “For the Genesis of Interview as a Genre,” 384.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, *What is Qualitative Interviewing?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ted Lyon, “Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre,” in *Latin American Literary Review* (Jul. – Dec. 1994), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Natsvlshvili, “For the Genesis of Interview as a Genre,” 387.

<sup>9</sup> Edwards and Holland, *What is Qualitative Interviewing?*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards and Holland, *What is Qualitative Interviewing?*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> H.K. Adriansen, “Timeline Interviews: A Tool for Conducting Life History Research,” in *Qualitative Studies* (3.1, 2012), 40.

political elites, but also movie stars, clergy, non-profit leaders, and popular authors.<sup>12</sup> These social elites are distinguished in some special manner, perhaps because of their wealth or their leadership their field. In the case of Whitman, he might be considered a strategic elite. Strategic elites are popular in a limited time span, and popular to a limited group of people.<sup>13</sup> Whitman's popularity was in relation to the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, thus limiting his popularity to the literate, to those interested in American poetry, and to those tolerant of literary experimentation both in form and content. The point of interviewing elites is to understand how and why they came to prominence and to satisfy a widely-held craving for information about those who have attained fame or celebrity status. These interviews seek to identify why certain people hold more influence in a particular community or on a particular subject.<sup>14</sup>

However, considering Whitman and who he was in society, elite may not be the appropriate word to describe him. While he was popular in certain spheres, Whitman did not consider himself above the common man. He took public transportation and associated with working class individuals. He saw the significance of democracy in American life, and sought to emphasize the potential of the average American.<sup>15</sup> He did not view himself as an elite, but believed that the message he was trying to convey in his words was of elite quality.

The information derived from the interview is then compiled by the interviewer, published, and distributed to the public. In the nineteenth century, this was most often done in newspapers. The interview was represented in a form similar to a narrative, with limited quotes from the interviewee and culminating in a statement regarding what the interviewer thinks about

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<sup>12</sup> Teresa Odendahl and Aileen M. Shaw, "Interviewing Elites," in *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, ed. F. Gubrium and JA Hosltein (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2002), 300.

<sup>13</sup> Odendahl and Shaw, "Interviewing Elites," 301.

<sup>14</sup> Odendahl and Shaw, "Interviewing Elites," 315.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Wolfe, "Song of the Exposition [1871]," in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), reprinted with permission.

their subject both morally and factually. This publication is known as a “newspaper interview,” reporting about the visit and experience rather than the content derived from discussion.<sup>16</sup> Interviewers told a story about the person, thus subjecting the interviewer to a bit of creative license.

Newspaper interviews from the late nineteenth century resemble a narrative form because they tell a story about their subject. They contextualize the scenario in which the interview was conducted, the appearance of its subject, and culminate in a decision about some aspect of the subject based on the context and topics which were discussed. This form of publication is drastically different compared to the modern twenty-first century interview. Modern interviews often only publish the transcript of the dialogue that was exchanged between the interviewer and their subject.<sup>17</sup> By omitting contextual details, modern interviews prioritize the content derived from the conversation rather than the experience as a whole. Newspaper interviews saw the significance of the comprehensive experience of an interview. The interviewer drafts the narrative based on the inclusion and exclusion of certain details, emphasizing some points more than others, as well as writing what the audience wants to read.

Considering the evolution of interview definition and practice, the narrative structure of the interview in the nineteenth century represents a historical phenomenon. Modern twenty-first century depictions of the interview exist almost exclusively in the presentation of dialogue. They focus more on the conversation, rather than offering an overall account of the subject based on the interviewer’s opinions.

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<sup>16</sup> Brett Barney, Whitman’s Interviews Introductory Statement on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

<sup>17</sup> Dean Scheibel, “Qualitative, Ethnographic, and Performative Approaches to Communication,” in *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*, ed. William F. Eadie (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2009), 67.

Analysis of character relevance as it is revealed through interviews has been conducted for two other prominent nineteenth-century authors – Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde. Gary Scharnhorst provides in-depth analyses of Twain in two different books – *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain* and *Twain in his Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of his Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*.<sup>18</sup> These books include transcriptions of various interviews done with Twain. They range in year from 1885 to 1985,<sup>19</sup> and identify how Twain was viewed by the people around him. In *Mainly the Truth*, the interviews are organized chronologically; however, Scharnhorst takes the organization one step further and identifies an overarching theme for each segment of Twain's life. These sections include "Only Joking," "The Best and Worst of Times," "Sentimental Journey," and "The Long Goodbye."<sup>20</sup> By breaking down Twain's life into different time segments, Scharnhorst illuminates Twain's character and behavior at various points in his life and also contextualizes Twain's life in relation to the interview. This contextualization helps provide insight as to what Twain was doing when the interview occurred, as well as what was going on in the world around him. It sheds light on Twain's thinking during the interview, as well as his behavior.

In his analysis of Twain, Scharnhorst explains that Twain was very concerned about how he was presented in public.<sup>21</sup> However, he was not afraid to talk. While he insisted that the interviewers paraphrase his words, Twain was never at a loss for words, whether he was

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<sup>18</sup> Scharnhorst, *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009) and *Twain in his Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of his Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> While Twain died in 1910, several interviews were published posthumously. He maintained a presence with young children, and these later interviews are their recollections of Twain.

<sup>20</sup> Scharnhorst, *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain*, vii.

<sup>21</sup> Scharnhorst, *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain*, vii.



promoting women's suffrage, his works, humor, or reminiscing on his past.<sup>22</sup> In this, Scharnhorst argues that Twain was an honorable man. He told the truth mainly, no matter what the topic of discussion was.<sup>23</sup> He knew the importance of interviews for what they said about him and the works that he produced.

Wilde is portrayed as a drastically different character from Twain. While Twain participated in interviews because it was expected of him as an author, Wilde partook in interviews as a means to boost his popularity. Wilde himself said that "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."<sup>24</sup> Elias Altman's "The Importance of Being Wilde" recounts the two tours Wilde took to the United States. This essay highlights how Wilde incorporated extreme theatrics and self-promotion in interviews. It identifies how Wilde "worked hard at public performances... the poses he struck and the lines he delivered."<sup>25</sup> Altman's article addresses the significance of understanding Wilde's character in the eyes of his interviewers and culminates with an introduction to Matthew Hofer's *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*,<sup>26</sup> a collection of Wilde's interviews with annotations to illuminate his character and how he was interpreted by those around him. The best exchange found in the article was about Wilde and his interview with the *Boston Globe*. While he thought that many interviews simply painted a false image, the *Globe* claimed that he absolutely understood the significance of free advertising.

Considering the *Globe*'s statement about Wilde's opinion on interviews, in addition to Hofer's analysis of Wilde's American interviews, Wilde is portrayed as an egotist in Hofer's

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<sup>22</sup> Scharnhorst, *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain*, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Scharnhorst, *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain*, xvii.

<sup>24</sup> Elias Altman, "Importance of Being Wilde," *Lapham's Quarterly* Roundtable Blog, 11 March 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Altman, "Importance of Being Wilde."

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Hofer, *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

analysis.<sup>27</sup> His excessive theatrics in interviews led to inconsistent and inaccurate depictions of both him and his thoughts.<sup>28</sup> This led to many people questioning not only his character, but also his works and judgement. He was subjected to scrutiny and satire in many other publications.<sup>29</sup> However, this negative publicity had no effect on Wilde. He was mostly thrilled to still be the topic of conversation, and any publicity he received was better than no publicity at all.

As represented by Hofer, Scharnhorst, and various analyses of the qualitative interview, several different conclusions can be derived from an interview. However, a significant factor of their analysis is that they did previous research on their subject. In regard to Whitman, David Reynolds' *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* can serve as a baseline identifier of Whitman's character to which Whitman's interviews are compared. He breaks down Whitman's life into seven different sections – chronology, popular culture, oratory, visual arts, philosophy, sex and gender, and the Civil War.<sup>30</sup> Each section gives greater insight into Whitman's character, specifically what he thought about himself, as well as how he wanted to change the views of society through his words, both written and spoken.

Reynolds also does an excellent job of pointing out the two different responses Whitman received due to his writing, both positive and negative, and avoids bias of siding with one or the other. Reynolds helps to identify why Whitman possessed the character he had. The manner in which Whitman described himself, along with the records of his interviews, helps create a more complete image of him regarding why he said, did, and reacted to things in certain ways.

The very definition of the qualitative interview gives insight in to how conclusions are drawn in an interview. The dialogue that exists between an interviewer and interviewee reveals

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<sup>27</sup> Hofer, *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Hofer, *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Hofer, *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Davis S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), vii.

how the interviewer views a certain event or aspect of life, and in combination with the interviewer's creative license in reporting the interview, they provide varying opinions about their subject. In the case of the compiled Whitman interviews, many of them arrive at the same conclusion: while he is a kind, gentle man, they do not understand how someone of his character could write such controversial poetry.

## Part II: Whitman's Character and Interview Performance

The conclusions many of the interviews derive about Whitman are based on both his part of the dialogue and behavior during the interview. To fully comprehend Whitman's behavior, it is necessary to first identify who Whitman himself was. David Reynolds' biography of Whitman, *Walt Whitman's America*, highlights the most significant aspects of his life that contributed to his character. Reynolds' biography provides an excellent contextualization of Whitman's life. As most of the interviews he participated in were in the latter part of his life, after his first stroke in 1873, Reynolds addresses what Whitman thought about his disability, how he managed it, and how others viewed him as a result. As noted above, Reynolds' biography serves as an effective basis for testing the "character" of Whitman as presented in the interviews.

Whitman had a messianic vision of himself and believed he was the "quintessential democratic poet who could help cure the many ills of society."<sup>31</sup> His poems, however, were not well-received by the American public. Many of the topics he discusses in his poetry were considered controversial, specifically including abolitionism and sexuality. The form of Whitman's poetry was also jarring because his free-verse style generally lacked rhyme, traditional meter and the stanzaic forms that dominated conventional British and American poetry.

In order to combat the negative feedback his poetry received, Whitman engaged in self-promotion.<sup>32</sup> He elected to write anonymous reviews of his works, both positive and negative, attempting to establish himself as a truly American poet. He wanted to "reveal new possibilities of cultural cohesion and togetherness."<sup>33</sup> However, after his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was

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<sup>31</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), x.

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 13.

published in 1855, Whitman was viewed as a social drop-out. He turned away money-making opportunities in favor of writing, thus embodying more of a vagabond personality.<sup>34</sup> Never very wealthy, he associated with common people rather than the elites of society. He vocalized his criticism of public figures, both in his daily conversation and various writings. While he continued to write poetry, he was forced to publish through his own means, as no American publisher was willing to take on such a controversial author and subject matter. Whitman printed the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* on his own.<sup>35</sup> In all of this, Whitman slowly grew in popularity and was personable with those around him. His writing was quite popular in England, which thus gradually influenced his reception in the United States. People began to wonder, who was this man who writes such explicit content? Journalists and companions sought to answer this question by conducting interviews with the “Good Gray Poet” in order to understand the man behind the words.

Whitman’s recorded interviews are housed in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s *Walt Whitman Archive*, [www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org), including both transcriptions and images of the printed text. In total there are 116 interviews; however this includes those that were published posthumously. Ninety interviews conducted with Whitman were published during his lifetime, with dates ranging from October 1866 to February 1892. They generally have a similar structure, opening with the arrival to Whitman’s house in Camden, describing his physical appearance, addressing criticism of his poetry (primarily *Leaves of Grass*), and ending with an assessment of Whitman’s character. These words used to describe Whitman’s works and character, however,

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<sup>34</sup> Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 180.

<sup>35</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, originally published in *The Springfield Daily Republican*, 23 July 1875, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

vary greatly from interview to interview. Some sing his praises, while others are extremely critical of who he was and what he wrote about, questioning his overall integrity.

The words Whitman uses to describe not only *Leaves of Grass* but also himself are either identical or closely synonymous across all his interviews. His mannerisms were also similar across most of his interviews. While he looked a little disheveled, particularly as he aged and got sick, he still maintained a grand persona. Moncure Conway states that he could “feel at every moment the *reality* of every word and movement of the man.”<sup>36</sup> The performance he gave both as an interview subject as well as an orator of his own poems was simple yet powerful. He commanded attention, yet maintained an inviting nature.

One action of Whitman’s transpires across most of the interviews: he enjoys asking the interviewers questions about themselves before answering their questions. These questions were often related to his interviewers’ lives, such as their health, recent travels, their companions, and their literary interests.<sup>37</sup> Olive Harper records that she had to remind them both of her purpose for being in Whitman’s company to get the interview on track because he began asking her questions instead of vice versa.<sup>38</sup> Moncure Conway, with whom he participated in several interviews, eventually became a good friend of Whitman’s, and their interviews involved a lot of back and forth questioning.<sup>39</sup> Even at the end of his life, Whitman asked his interviewers

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<sup>36</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman,” interview by Moncure D. Conway, 15 October 1866, originally published in *The Fortnightly Review*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>37</sup> Walt Whitman, “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” interview by Moncure D. Conway, 27 November 1875, originally published in *The Academy*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>38</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman in Private Life,” interview by Olive Harper, 6 November 1875, originally published in *Daily Graphic*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>39</sup> Walt Whitman, “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” interview by Moncure D. Conway, 27 November 1875, originally published in *The Academy*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

questions about their lives and the outside world, from which he had removed himself to a degree because of his limited mobility.<sup>40</sup>

Several of the interviews also discuss Whitman's performance of his poetry. It is important to note, however, that Whitman's poems themselves were the stage of his performances. Whitman adopted a new persona for his poetry. He wanted to have a connection with his audience that was meaningful.<sup>41</sup> However, Whitman only gave a limited number of public readings of his works in the early part of his career. His focus was on the written words rather than their delivery. Thus, when he did read his poems, he read leisurely, with frequent pauses, strict enunciation, and very limited gestures.<sup>42</sup> As the interviews portray Whitman as a kind, warm-hearted person in society, that is the authentic character he wanted. He sought to maintain good relationships with those around him. This then brings into question why Whitman discussed relatively controversial subject matter in his poems, according to various reviews. In their opinion, the fact that Whitman discussed socially taboo topics rather than subjects both he and readers of his works had interest in did not accurately reflect his desire to be liked and appreciated by his audience. The only way his actions would make sense would be if he thought it was more important to break silence on these socially inappropriate subjects rather than coddle his readers.

Whitman also was very consistent in how he talked about both himself and his works. He was not afraid to admit that his poems "are ambitious and egotistical" because he felt that it was

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<sup>40</sup> Walt Whitman, "Walt Whitman's Dying Hours," interview by Anonymous, 13 February 1892, originally published in *The Evening Telegram*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>41</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Walt Whitman, "Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself," interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

important to speak the truth.<sup>43</sup> “Song of Myself” expresses not only his egotism, but also the various personas he adopts.<sup>44</sup> As a result, he did not always receive glowing reports from his interviewers. George Alfred Townsend contended that Whitman was “a dreadful spectacle of imbecile ambition, explainable only on the theories of nature, rum, and vanity, he chants himself into ecstasy, believes himself the very biggest Indian, and is incomprehensible to nobody else, if to himself.”<sup>45</sup> Townsend believed that Whitman was not only a character to others, but to himself. According to Townsend, he was so caught up in his words that he lost who he truly was and became the ideal man he discussed in his poems.

Unlike most twenty-first century interviews, many of Whitman’s interviews occurred by happenstance when people stopped by his house rather than scheduling an interview with him. While it seems plausible that Whitman would be caught off-guard by these surprise guests, his behavior and responses to questions was nearly identical to that of scheduled interviews. However, while he was always respectful to his interviewers, when an unscheduled interview arose, he openly admits his frustration at constantly answering questions about *Leaves of Grass*: “‘I’m almost tired,’ he said, in a tone of mingled patience and fortitude, ‘of talking of that.’”<sup>46</sup> As he answered the exact same questions in scheduled interviews, having to repeat himself in unscheduled interviews seemed to have irritated him. However, he continued to maintain his

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<sup>43</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> Walt Whitman, “Letter from George Alfred Townsend,” interview by George Alfred Townsend, 23 September 1868, originally published in *Cleveland Leader*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>46</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: The Athletic Bard Paralyzed and in a Rocking Chair,” interview by J.B.S., 21 May 1876, originally published in *The World*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.



warm demeanor, inviting people into his home and patiently answering their questions despite his illnesses.

An important thing to consider, however, is that interviews themselves are essentially a performance. Not only is the interview subject a performer in trying to portray himself how he desires, but the interviewer also may exercise creative license. Carolyn Wright argues that interviews are a “literature-derived genre, dependent upon the [prior] existence of the author and the author’s work, just as the literary work is anterior to and dependent upon the existence of the world itself.”<sup>47</sup> The act of taking creative license in interview publication was a common trait across newspaper interviews. All of Whitman’s interviews followed the same format with the reason for the interview, arrival at Whitman’s home, an initial judgement of his appearance, the interview itself, and the conclusion the interviewer arrived at. There is a certain degree of creative license the interviewer can use in the publication, both in omitting certain details and elaborating on others. Thus, it brings into question the accuracy of the interview itself, what was said and what was not.

As Whitman’s character appears to be similar across the interviews, it would be easy to assume that this is who Walt Whitman was. However, Whitman was also viewed as an actor. His shaggy beard and plain clothes made his appearance difficult to decipher, thus giving him the fluidity of an actor. His friends went so far as to state that he was “a poseur of truly colossal proportions, one to whom playing a part had long before become so habitual that he ceased to be conscious that he was doing it.”<sup>48</sup> This claim suggests that Whitman had created a new version of himself, and had seemingly taken on this new identity as his primary character. Thus,

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<sup>47</sup> Carolyn Wright, “Revelations and Concealments: Interviewers and Writers,” (on *Interviews with Contemporary Writers: Second Series, 1972-1982* ed. L. S. Dembo; *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets* by Richard Jackson; & *Women Writers Talking* by Janet Todd)” *The Georgia Review* 38.3 (1984), 639.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 43.

considering his relationship with other people, it is impossible to decipher which version of Whitman was real: this radical character that he had developed through his behavior and poetry, or Walter Whitman who was born in Long Island, had seven siblings, and had a humble beginning.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 4.

## Part III: Whitman and Collaboration

Interviews are a collaborative process. The dialogue that exists between the subject and the interviewer represents a collaborative relationship to disseminate knowledge about the subject. The give-and-take method of asking and answering questions allows both the subject and interviewer to take at least partial ownership of the information to be disseminated.<sup>50</sup> However, considering that interviews are construed as performances, subjects are at liberty to pick and choose what information they choose to share, thus enabling a censorship of self.<sup>51</sup> Walt Whitman's selectivity in what information he shared was centered around his presentation of himself as a singular author. As he sought to establish himself as the leading American poet, he wanted to ensure that he was an original in his topics of choice.

The *Walt Whitman Archive* seeks to reveal Whitman as both a creator and a collaborator. This is done through the presentation of not just his interviews, but also journalism, correspondence, and marginalia.<sup>52</sup> Analyses of the relationship he had with his publishers, however, present a different type of collaboration altogether. Whitman worked with his publishers to produce his poems in a manner that reflected his desire for knowledge dissemination. His 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contained images of sperm all over the front cover. A recent analysis by Ed Folsom, a prominent Whitman scholar, reveals that Whitman may have believed that his "words were the seeds for new ideas, a new nation, a new conception of democracy" that needed to "penetrate readers and fertilize their imaginations."<sup>53</sup> If Whitman did

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<sup>50</sup> Ted Lyon, "Jorge Luis Borges and the Interview as Literary Genre," in *Latin American Literary Review* (Jul. – Dec. 1994), 77.

<sup>51</sup> Annmarie Turnbull, "Collaboration and Censorship in the Oral History Interview," in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* (3.1, 2000), 22.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Price, "'Many Long Dumb Voices... Clarified and Transfigured': The *Walt Whitman Archive* and the Scholarly Edition in the Digital Age," in *Nuovi Annali Della Scuola Speciale per Archivisti e Bibliotecari* (XVIII, 2014), 245-246.

<sup>53</sup> Ed Folsom, *Whitman Making Books: Books Making Whitman*, (Iowa City: Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, 2005), 18.

indeed believe this, it would further emphasize his egotism in that he believed himself responsible for educating his audience, as he was the ideal figure and personality.<sup>54</sup>

A famous instance of collaboration which included Whitman did not involve collaboration on the actual work itself. After the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published, Whitman received a letter from Ralph Waldo Emerson commending him for his work and greeting him “at the beginning of a great career.”<sup>55</sup> Elated that Emerson was a fan of his work, Whitman published Emerson’s letter at the back of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* without his permission. He had hoped that an endorsement from Emerson would confirm his high standing as an author. However, this ultimately led to tension between Emerson and Whitman. Emerson admitted to fluctuating in his opinion of Whitman throughout the course of their relationship.<sup>56</sup>

Whitman appears to have learned to a certain degree from his experience with Emerson regarding letter publication. Robert Buchanan published an affectionate letter about Whitman, praising his poetic genius and expressing sympathy for his current invalid state. When asked about the contents of the letter, Whitman professed that he “should have done [his] best to stop the publication of it.” Whitman simply wanted to protect Buchanan himself from bad press, and had intended to critique the letter prior to it being released.<sup>57</sup> However, Whitman and Buchanan maintained a professional relationship after the letter’s publication, based on the letters they exchanged after the incident.

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<sup>54</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>55</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>57</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: The Athletic Bard Paralyzed and in a Rocking Chair,” interview by J.B.S., 21 May 1876, originally published in *The World*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

Whitman observed that he obtained the concepts presented in his poems from regular people. He stated, “These were all inarticulate poets, and [I] interpreted them.”<sup>58</sup> Whitman did not invent the incidents found in his poems based on his own experiences, but instead took them from regular people he associated with. They provided excellent stories, and he thought himself to be the best person to express these stories in a manner that would be enticing to readers. However, within the poems themselves, Whitman never cited his inspirations. This could prove misleading to his audience, as he presents himself as a singular voice who has had a wide variety of life experience, when in reality he did not have half the experiences of those from whom he drew inspiration. While he was involved in the military hospital efforts of the Civil War, he did not have actual military experience in battle. Modern publications are guilty of the same practice. *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman* present Whitman as the sole creator of his works while doing little to highlight others who contributed to his writings.<sup>59</sup>

In combination with the stories he heard from others, Whitman’s poems were also influenced by various musicians. As a result, some of his poems had a certain “strong, rhythmical, pulsing, *musical power*” despite his usual avoidance of traditional stanzas and rhyme.<sup>60</sup> Whitman drew a great amount of influence specifically from Italian operas. He incorporates several musical terms within the text of his poems, going so far as to include some in his poem titles, specifically “Song of Myself,” “Drum Taps,” and “Chants Democratic.” While Whitman noted the significance of music in his poems, he rarely cites any particular musicians within the text or publication itself. Instead he tends to cite them in interviews at a later date. By rarely crediting

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<sup>58</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman,” interview by Moncure D. Conway, 15 October 1866, originally published in *The Fortnightly Review*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>59</sup> Price, “Many Long Dumb Voices,” 245.

<sup>60</sup> Walt Whitman, “Whitman and Alboni,” interview by Anonymous, between 1871 and 1883, originally published in *Poughkeepsie Daily News*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

others in his published works, Whitman again presents his egotism. While Whitman engaged in collaborative efforts to create his poems, he did not have the experiences himself. But, as he seeks to cite these stories as his own, he further promotes his egotism as the ideal character.<sup>61</sup>

Whitman does address the significant relationships he had with certain people in his life and the impact they had on him either creatively or socially in his interviews. One of these relationships, strictly professional, was with George Alfred Townsend. In an interview Townsend conducted with Whitman, he offers advice to Whitman about including rhyme in his poems in order to avoid offense. Whitman responded with a terse no, claiming that “nature doesn’t teach us in that way.” Townsend presents an extremely negative image of Whitman, citing that he only imagines the perfect poem, but cannot create it himself.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps Townsend had such a bad impression of Whitman because he was a novelist, not a poet. He was bitter at the fact that Whitman would not accept his constructive criticism, and thus considered him a hot-headed, egotistical poet.

Whitman maintained a close personal relationship with Lord Alfred Tennyson. He likened their affection toward each other to that of brothers rather than fellow poets.<sup>63</sup> He considered Tennyson to be “of priceless value” to the democratic and poetic world.<sup>64</sup> However, Whitman’s opinion of Tennyson fluctuates throughout their relationship. In some interviews, Whitman

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<sup>61</sup> Donald Barlow Stauffer, “Opera and Opera Singers,” in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), reprinted with permission.

<sup>62</sup> Walt Whitman, “Letter from George Alfred Townsend,” interview by George Alfred Townsend, 23 September 1868, originally published in *Cleveland Leader*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>63</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>64</sup> Walt Whitman, “Wilde and Whitman,” interview by Anonymous, 19 January 1882, originally published in *The Philadelphia Press*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

claims that Tennyson is his favorite poet, and in others, that Tennyson is too saint-like.<sup>65</sup> In one interview, Whitman argues that Tennyson is unable to touch people “in their very cores of understanding and desire.”<sup>66</sup> Despite Whitman’s inconsistency in his opinion of Tennyson, the two remained very close, often exchanging correspondence. Whitman and Tennyson, while they provided criticism of each other’s works, did not directly offer suggestions so as to improve the other’s content.

While Whitman did not cite his collaborators within his own works, he was also not cited as a collaborator in others’ works. He is believed to have worked with William Swinton on his *Rambles Among Words*. C. Carroll Hollis suggests that Whitman served as anonymous co-author or ghostwriter for at least parts of this publication. Whitman and Swinton exchanged several letters pertaining to both language and the actual content in *Rambles* before its publication, suggesting a close personal relationship.<sup>67</sup> If Hollis’ claim is true, it brings into question why Whitman did not require Swinton to cite him as a co-author. Perhaps, since he himself did not cite co-authors or consultants in his own work, he thought it appropriate to reciprocate when he made relatively minor contributions as a consultant or co-author.

Whitman was concerned about his appearance in society throughout the course of his life. Thus, when the time came that his popularity prompted a biography, he still wanted himself to be portrayed a certain way. He entrusted Richard Bucke, a close friend, to write the biography. However, Whitman was a primary advisor on the project. Whitman provided guidance through

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<sup>65</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: The Poet Chats on the Haps and Mishaps of Life,” interview by Isaac R. Pennypacker, 3 March 1880, originally published in *The Press, Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>66</sup> Walt Whitman, “Every Day Talk: Walt Whitman’s Story of the Purpose of His Writings – Odds and Ends,” interview by Anonymous, 7 September 1888, originally published in *The Press, Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>67</sup> Michael R. Dressman, “Language,” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, ed. J.R. LeMaster (Abingdon: Routledge – Taylor & Francis, 2013), 349.

the duration of the writing process, changing, for example, Bucke's idea of a demi-god into someone whose personality was robust.<sup>68</sup> Whitman believed that Bucke very accurately represented the earlier part of his life.<sup>69</sup> However, as Whitman served as an editor and advisor to the project, it brings into question how much of the biography was Whitman's voice, and how much of it was Bucke's. Although Whitman contributed a significant amount of work to the text, he did not cite himself as a co-author. He wanted the work to be published under Bucke's name so that it would be seen as a biography rather than autobiography. Perhaps this was Whitman's attempt to hide his egotism.

Whitman was protective of his manner of language and storytelling. While he is warm in conversation, when it comes to the written word, Whitman was possessive. Not only did he want himself presented in a certain light, he wanted the stories he told to be read in a particular manner. That is why he developed a specific character in his interviews, conveyed others' ideas as his own, and sought publicity in both positive and negative lights.

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<sup>68</sup> "Richard Maurice Bucke," Disciple entry on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

<sup>69</sup> Walt Whitman, "Walt Whitman's Dying Hours," interview by Anonymous, 13 February 1892, originally published in *The Evening Telegram*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.



#### Part IV: Whitman and His Interviews with Himself

The criticism that Walt Whitman received on both his character and his writing influenced him not only to write anonymous reviews of *Leaves of Grass*, but also to publish anonymous interviews with himself. The *Walt Whitman Archive* has identified drafts in Whitman's handwriting of four published interviews about Whitman himself. While some interviews listed as anonymous may also be written by Whitman, these four provide insight as to how Whitman wanted himself viewed at various points in his life.

Whitman's first "interview" with himself was published November 18, 1875 in Washington D.C.'s *Evening Star*. It depicts Whitman at Edgar Allan Poe's re-burial service. However, the very first sentence of the article informs the reader that Whitman was the only prominent author in attendance.<sup>70</sup> He also publicly announces that he will not be making any sort of statement in order to respect the memory of Poe. By presenting himself in this fashion, Whitman appears very virtuous. He selflessly went to Poe's funeral service, considering he was recovering from a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. His emphasis on being the only poet of prominence in attendance, however, gives a slightly egotistic impression of Whitman, considering he wrote it about himself.

His second self-interview was published March 29, 1877 in the *Camden Daily Post*, Whitman's local paper. He talks about his improved health condition, his visit to Manhattan, the events he attended, and his plans for the future. This interview is presented more like a life update for Whitman rather than an actual interview. He does not address anything pertaining to his works or politics, and instead focuses on the experiences he recently had in his life. The one

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<sup>70</sup> "About the most significant part of the Poe re-burial ceremonies yesterday—which only a crowded and remarkably magnetic audience of the very best class of young people, women preponderating, prevented from growing tedious—was the marked absence from the spot of every popular poet and author, American and foreign. Only Walt Whitman was present."

quote Whitman includes presents a humbler version of himself than previously seen in both his writing and other interviews. When asked if he would give a speech at an event, he declined, claiming that he “knew nothing of the subject under debate.”<sup>71</sup> His admittance of inadequate knowledge of the topic may well have been coy. Often accused of being egotistical, Whitman may have judged it to be advantageous to be seen as modest at this juncture in his life.

Whitman’s third self-interview was published September 21, 1879 in *The Denver Tribune*. Unlike the other “interviews,” in which no official interviewer exists, Whitman states that a man from *The Tribune* comes to conduct the interview. The topic focuses on his journey to the western United States. He speaks reverently about the places he visited across the Great Plains, specifically the time he spent in Denver. He discusses how he enjoyed the company of the people of Denver, and his plans to return to the city at the end of the year, despite his being an invalid.<sup>72</sup> Whitman primarily addresses the significance of the fresh air he experienced in Denver. The open space was freeing to him, and exposed him to the influence the Midwest could have on art and literature.

The last interview Whitman conducted with himself was right at the end of his life in 1892. Published by Charles L. Webster in *Autobiographia: Or the Story of a Life*, this interview is headed “Reminiscences.” Whitman recounts his introduction to the newspaper business, the various papers he worked with, including *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. The whole article appears to be Whitman’s opinions of his childhood and young adult life, thus reflecting his awareness of his mortality in his old age. Whitman paints himself in various ways in this article. First, the idea

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<sup>71</sup> Interview citation *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>72</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman’s Impressions of Denver and the West,” interview by Walt Whitman, originally published in *Denver Tribune*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

that he was a published author at the age of eleven suggests that he was a writing prodigy. Then, by doing most of the hard printing work himself, Whitman establishes both his physical strength as well as the absolute dedication he had during his printing years. The article, published right at the end of his life, is a reminiscence. It conveys the thrill he felt in his childhood and youth when involved with to writing and printing.<sup>73</sup>

Oddly enough, none of the interviews Whitman conducts with himself include anything about *Leaves of Grass*. They all appear to be testaments to his character at various points in his life. He talks about the passion he had for printing in his youth, his superior character and moral stance, his realization of his intellectual ability, and his love of the Prairies. Not once does he address the negative feedback he received on *Leaves of Grass*. Where the interviews he partook in with outside characters helped to improve his popularity based on their outside opinions, Whitman's interviews with himself are biased in that he only presents himself in a positive, virtuous light. He treats the interviews as a time to boast about himself, his ideal character, and give insight as to what he was doing or thinking at a particular point in his life. In doing so, Whitman further emphasizes his egotism and concern with how he was portrayed.

Not only did Whitman interview himself to create a certain image of his character, he also reviewed his own poetry to help create opinions about his writing. Just pertaining to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote three reviews of the collection, each within two months of each other. In the reviews, he identifies himself as an American bard who addresses the controversies of civilization in poems that have their own form.<sup>74</sup> He is blunt, and does not

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<sup>73</sup> Walt Whitman, "Autobiographia: Starting Newspapers (Another Account)," interview by Walt Whitman, 1892, originally published in *Walt Whitman: Autobiographia: or the Story of a Life* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1892), *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>74</sup> Walt Whitman, "Walt Whitman and His Poems," originally published in *The United States Review* (5, September 1855), *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

attempt to paint a better picture of the world around him.<sup>75</sup> He also addresses his egotism, talking about the significance of remaining true to oneself in words and poems. Specifically, in regard to himself, he wanted to “fix and publish” his own character so as to set an example “for the present and future of American letters and American young men.”<sup>76</sup>

Whitman depicts his poetry in very positive lights. In doing so, he attempts to boost his popularity and draw in a larger audience to his works. By avoiding negative images of himself, he continues to present himself as a model human personality.<sup>77</sup> He believes his writing conveys the values of democracy and is what people should be reading in order to better understand and improve themselves. Where the interviews Whitman conducted with himself provided contextualization of his life and his views of himself later in life as an old, disabled man, Whitman’s early reviews of *Leaves of Grass* portray him as a young, vibrant man who is not afraid to speak the truth in any and all circumstances. His very first review concludes with a sweeping claim: “You have come in good time, Walt Whitman! In opinions, in manners, in costumes, in books, in the aims and occupancy of life, in associates, in poems, conformity to all unnatural and tainted customs passes without remark, while perfect naturalness, health, faith, self-reliance, and all primal expressions of the manliest love and friendship, subject one to the

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<sup>75</sup> Walt Whitman, “An English and An American Poet,” originally published in *American Phrenological Journal* (22, October 1855), *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>76</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman, A Brooklyn Boy,” originally published in *The Brooklyn Daily Times* (2, 29 September 1855), *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>77</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman: His Life, His Poetry, Himself,” interview by James Matlack Scovel, 23 July 1875, originally published in *The Springfield Republican*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

stare and controversy of the world.”<sup>78</sup> Whitman believes he is the best person to present the values of democracy and important societal topics in his poetry.

Whitman was not the only one to review his own works and conduct self-interviews. Mark Twain engaged in the same practice; however, his presentation of the interview was far different from Whitman’s. Twain presented his self-interview as dialogue between Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens. Initially, one may think that the two men are completely different people. However, Mark Twain was the pen name for Samuel Clemens. By presenting both men in the conversation, Twain reveals the character differences between his real self and his pen self. Samuel Clemens is more serious and organized, while Mark Twain is more comedic. Clemens likens Twain to a “disaster.”<sup>79</sup> In presenting both sides of his character, Twain (Clemens) shows the difference between his personal life and his public life. Samuel Clemens adopts an entirely new personality as Mark Twain.

Whitman engaged in no such clarification between Walter Whitman of Long Island and Walt Whitman of Camden. The distinction between the two is very blurred. If any obvious character change of his occurred, it was after Whitman’s first stroke. He went from being seen as a hot-headed, radical, egocentric young man to a handicapped, tired old man.<sup>80</sup> While he maintained his warm-hearted nature throughout his life, the way he carried himself and his persona drastically changed after his stroke. Whitman addressed his alleged change of character only once, in a letter he wrote to Anne Gilchrist on 20 March 1872. He says, “You must not

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<sup>78</sup> Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman and His Poems,” originally published in *The United States Review* (5, September 1855), *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Twain, “Samuel L. Clemens Interviews the Famous Humorist, Mark Twain,” interview by Samuel L. Clemens, 30 November 1905, originally published in *Seattle Star*, in *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 526.

<sup>80</sup> Walt Whitman, “An Old Poet’s Reception,” interview by Anonymous, 15 April 1887, originally published in *The Evening Sun*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.

construct such an unauthorized & imaginary ideal Figure, & call it W. W. and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W. W. is a very plain personage, & entirely unworthy such devotion."<sup>81</sup> The difference between Whitman's acknowledgement of a difference between the created and the real-life "Walt Whitman" versus Samuel Clemens' identification of Mark Twain is that Whitman's acknowledgement was in private correspondence, not a published interview intended for public knowledge. While he himself notes the fact that he has invented a new character in his writing, he only told this to others in private.

Walt Whitman was extremely concerned with how he was viewed by his audience. He saw himself as the embodiment of the ideal character. Thus, he sought to portray himself in certain lights. He wanted to be the bard of American poetry, and thus wrote about both himself and the content of his poems in a very positive manner. His actions represent the egotistical nature of Whitman, not necessarily caring about citing the collaboration he had with his friends, other poets, or the general public. He wanted to be seen as creative, innovative, and passionate about the content in his poems, as well as a cultured human being.

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<sup>81</sup> "Walt Whitman to Anne Gilchrist, 20 March 1872," *The Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>>.

## CONCLUSION

The issue remains, however, as to whether interviews are an accurate representation of character. Based on the interview genre characteristics, Reynolds' biography of Walt Whitman, and the Whitman interviews themselves, it is safe to say no, the interviews are not an accurate representation of Whitman's character.

Interviews are a creative art. Not only does the subject seek to present himself or herself in a certain manner, but the presentation of the interview is also open to creative license. The conversation that exists between an interviewer and interviewee, in combination with the interviewee's self-presentation and the interviewer's creative license, provide varying opinions about the subject at hand. In the case of the compiled Walt Whitman interviews, many of them arrive at the same conclusion: while he is a kind, gentle man, they do not understand how someone of his character could write such controversial poetry.

Whitman saw the importance his poetry brought to the subject of democracy in America. He worked in his preferred field, was not afraid to speak his mind regarding political matters, and did not refrain from addressing controversial subjects. As a result, some viewed him as an egotist. His egotism was further presented in his establishment of himself as the primary creator of his works. He was a paradoxical figure in that he claimed to be self-reliant, original, and innovative, and yet he borrowed heavily from others, as is typical of writers. He believed himself to be the central figure, the ideal human personality, thus making him qualified to serve as the bard of American poetry.

As he was concerned with the public's opinion of him, Whitman not only anonymously reviewed his poetry, but also conducted "interviews" with himself. While these interviews appear more like a life update, there is still an element of egotistic, performer Whitman in his

language. He portrays himself as cultured, travelling across the country and meeting different people. He believes himself selfless, having been the only poet in attendance at Poe's re-burial service. He displays humility in his later life, choosing to not speak out in certain scenarios in which he is uneducated. By portraying himself in this manner, Whitman further enhances his performance as the ideal human figure. Whitman's belief in his idealistic self emphasizes his egotism as well as his radical beliefs in relation to traditional beliefs of the time, regarding both society and poetry.

Whitman took part in ninety interviews in his life. The way he presented himself did not evolve with each interview, but rather repeated itself, even when debilitated by illness. He used the same words to describe both himself and his poetry throughout his life, almost as if he was reciting a script. This further presents the idea that Whitman was a performer. Those closest to him could not completely comprehend who he was. Richard Bucke, whom Whitman entrusted with writing his biography, openly admitted to Whitman, "I do not believe that I or any of us realize, Walt, what you really are."<sup>82</sup> Considering his letter to Anne Gilchrist, he may have told only those who needed to know about his created character; however, he did not publicly acknowledge this character as Samuel Clemens did with Mark Twain. Walter Whitman presented his "Walt Whitman" character as an idealized persona, where Walter Whitman himself was a humble man who associated with the working class.

The interviews Whitman engaged in address more how Whitman interacted with other people rather than true facts about his character. Considering the creative license used by both Whitman and his interviewers, it is impossible to decipher who Walt Whitman really was. The

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<sup>82</sup> Walt Whitman, "Walt Whitman's Dying Hours," interview by Anonymous, 13 February 1892, originally published in *The Evening Telegram*, *Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Ken Price, accessed 21 September 2017 <<http://whitmanarchive.org>>.



Walt Whitman presented in the interviews is the Walt Whitman he wanted his readers to see. It is this version of Walt Whitman that deems him “The Good Gray Poet” rather than the egotistic, controversial, revolutionary Walt Whitman as construed in the language of his poetry.

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